

Google Communities: The Quest for Fiber

Four applicants to the Google Fiber for Communities program reflect on lessons learned and on keeping the gigabit spirit alive.

A BBP Staff Report

In November, Broadband Properties hosted a webinar moderated by telecom attorney Jim Baller – who works with Google on its Fiber for Communities project but was not representing the company in this setting – and featuring broadband activists from four of the communities whose responses to the Fiber for Communities RFI were rated highly by an independent evaluator.

Jay Ovittore of Greensboro, N.C., (and codirector of Communities United for Broadband), Jared Starkey of Topeka, Kan., Ben Teague and Hunter Goosmann of Asheville, N.C., and Chris Swanson of Duluth, Minn., described how their communities responded to the Google initiative and what they learned in the process.

Following are highlights from their discussion. You can download the complete webinar audio file and PowerPoint from www.muniwebinar.com.

How did community members work together to apply for Google funding?

Starkey: A true community-driven effort is very hard. We realized that involving the widest range of people would make us successful, so we included everyone from unemployed people to the general manager of the local CBS affiliate. It was the next generation of crowd sourcing – people would throw ideas out in various arenas. If we liked an idea, we'd run with it. We didn't force people to go through the bureaucracy or seek approval. The idea to rename Topeka had been suggested during another effort and was just laughed at. Here, it took 72 hours to approve. Once we had 17,000 members on



Facebook, we didn't have to try to get [government] on board with us.

Teague: In our case, the city was pushing us to do more and go higher. We ignited a fire in the community and created a unified method and voice. We literally had groups forming around the city, meeting in pubs and coffeehouses. One city councilman trudged through the snow to talk with five people. It was a grassroots effort, and organizations like Hunter Goosmann's [ERC Broadband, a nonprofit, community-focused broadband network] stoked the flames.

Goosmann: We already had a community network in place, so we wanted to build on it and take it further. We weren't just supporting what we were looking to do; we wanted to be a voice for everyone and help spur anyone who had an interest in expanding fiber optic connectivity.

Swanson: In Duluth, we had leadership from Mayor Don Ness and other elected officials as well as community support from nonprofits and volunteers. There were thousands of hours in grassroots effort from people who recognized that an ultra-high-speed network would keep our

economic base diverse and healthy. When we formed a committee, 10,000 people said they would sign up to help. Our Facebook page has 28,000 likes and friends. Our elected officials passed resolutions, and Mayor Ness was on the news, jumping into Lake Superior and announcing that firstborn children would be named after Google. We worked with many partners in the community to make the deployment easy for Google. Even after the marketing buzz died down, we continued working on critical pieces. We felt the network should be used for innovation, so we held an idea contest for which 125 people submitted entries; there were five winners. We launched the Northern Technology Consortium to help start-up entrepreneurs get funding and grow their companies in the area. We are continuing to diversify our economy, so no matter what happens with Google, the community has benefited.

Ovittore: In Greensboro, we got on board almost immediately. The city had thought about building a fiber network even prior to Google – it was going to run fiber around the airport, but the project was shelved with the recession. So when Google made its announcement, the city council allocated \$50,000

and hired a public relations firm, and we started an effort to get the brightest minds on board. We put together a committee and pooled our resources. There were many unlikely companions – I saw bloggers talking to the Chamber of Commerce. I was even welcomed with open arms on conservative talk radio! Everybody got that the network would have the ability to create jobs and improve our schools and hospitals. We found the identity of our community by working with people we never would have talked to otherwise.

How did the prospect of a fiber network fit into your economic development plans?

Ovittore: It's very attractive for our businesses to have the speed and technology to compete on a global level. We also have seven universities in Greensboro, and they saw the opportunity to bring more scientific research into the community.

Swanson: Everything boiled down to how to support entrepreneurs. We've been talking about what we can use as tools to engage people in technology and innovation. We got some amazing ideas in our idea contest.

Starkey: There are shovel-ready jobs in building the network, but the after-effects are where the real money is. The local Chamber of Commerce said it saw six or seven ideas for new businesses coming out of the project. I own a software company, and several clients asked, "If Google comes to Topeka, can we do x, y or z?" Within the first week of our dialogue, the Topeka movement was approached by Rural America On-Shore Outsourcing, an organization that uses broadband to keep call center jobs in the United States. It wanted office space here. A property management company walked up to me with a completed lease for Google. Everyone is excited to see what the next generation of services will be.

What happens if you don't get the Google investment?

Teague: Google Fiber is an accelerator to where we want to go, but we're already moving toward a fiber network.

We found the identity of our community [Greensboro, N.C.] by working with people we never would have talked to otherwise.

Swanson: We've had a lot of discussion about how we would get it done if Google doesn't come to the community. It does seem a little daunting at times. These networks are not inexpensive, but we will not leave any stone unturned.

Ovittore: The community in Greensboro will move forward to get higher speeds, depending on affordability. The drying up of resources from the government stimulus program makes it more difficult, but I feel good about the community continuing to pursue it.

Starkey: This movement was more about people wanting Topeka to be a better place than specifically about Google

Fiber. We found out that we have a lot of fiber here, and now we have an opportunity to take advantage of some of those rings and expand them. We're in the middle of a biomedical research corridor – the research organizations will push for fatter pipes to share data with the rest of the world.

Did you consider joining forces with other communities to aggregate demand?

Starkey: We talked with Lawrence, Kan., the home of the University of Kansas, and found out that the small communities between the two cities are also interested. If the network comes

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"I'm not sure that I'm quite typical of most of the Summit attendees, in that as a consultant who is involved in the FTTH, MDU, local government and the stimulus, nearly all of the presentations are germane. I thought the conference was excellent and appreciated the opportunity to be there. The conference and the BBP magazine continue to get better all the time and that is saying something in this day and age. Reading the BBP magazine cover to cover is S.O.P., standard operating procedure!"

– Terry Johnson, President
Utility Communications Network

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to Topeka, it will grow outward. The smaller communities will develop private networks at a more accelerated pace to tie into it.

Ovittore: At first, Greensboro saw this as a community-by-community effort. We thought the surrounding communities would benefit eventually [if we were selected by Google]. After the RFI, my personal view changed, and I saw this as an opportunity to focus not just on one's own community but on everybody's community. We all have our own needs, solutions and resources, so why not share them?

Teague: We went from "Do we propose

the section of Asheville most attractive to Google?" to "Do we do a regional initiative?" We had a range of emotions about working with other communities – we didn't want to be perceived [by Google] as weighed down, but we wanted to do as much as possible for the other communities around us.

What have you learned since submitting the application?

Ovittore: I've seen more people than ever before participate in community meetings.

Swanson: People are still asking what they can do to help. That's the most powerful part.

Starkey: One of the most intriguing things is how something that started as an online movement spilled out into the streets. My fiancée's grandmother is up to date on the project.

Did you include anchor institutions, such as schools and libraries?

Swanson: There was no institution that didn't get engaged. Our universities allowed us to e-mail their students. The Chamber of Commerce held events.

Ovittore: The director of public libraries did a YouTube video for us about the need for the library to do computer training. We reached every anchor institution we possibly could.

Has the prospect of open access been seen as a threat?

Starkey: To us, the prospect of open access is appealing. The towns surrounding us are just now getting access, and they have only one provider. If we can run fiber, they could use one of the major carriers and get all the benefits associated with that. We see it as an opportunity for the private sector.

Ovittore: If incumbents look at the cost of upgrading their archaic infrastructure and see that they could upgrade without having to put out the infrastructure cost, they'd know it's a win-win situation. Also, of course, you have more consumer choice.

Swanson: Competition is healthy. The biggest issue is having a choice between only two companies. That's problematic in any area, let alone broadband.

Are your groups watching new developments in the broadband market?

Ovittore: We haven't had a formal meeting since the Google RFI. We're trying to keep people informed through social media, such as the Communities United for Broadband Facebook page.

Starkey: Our group has become close-knit. We've been in contact with media outlets, and we keep the public informed.

Teague: We have a website, and traditional media sources use that to point out new developments. **BBP**



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